

History and Culture

READ TO DISCOVER

1. What are some major events in the growth of the Russian Empire?
2. How did the Soviet Union develop, and what was life like for its citizens?
3. What are some features of the region's culture?

WHY IT MATTERS

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, tensions between ethnic Russians and other groups have grown. Use cnnfyi.com or other **current events** sources to learn about ethnic conflict in Russia.

IDENTIFY

| | |
|-------|------------|
| Slavs | Cossacks |
| Rus | Bolsheviks |

DEFINE

| | |
|----------|--------------|
| czar | autarky |
| serfs | gulag |
| abdicate | shatter belt |
| soviets | |

LOCATE

| | |
|----------------|----------------|
| Kiev | St. Petersburg |
| Moscow | Amur River |
| Sea of Okhotsk | Minsk |

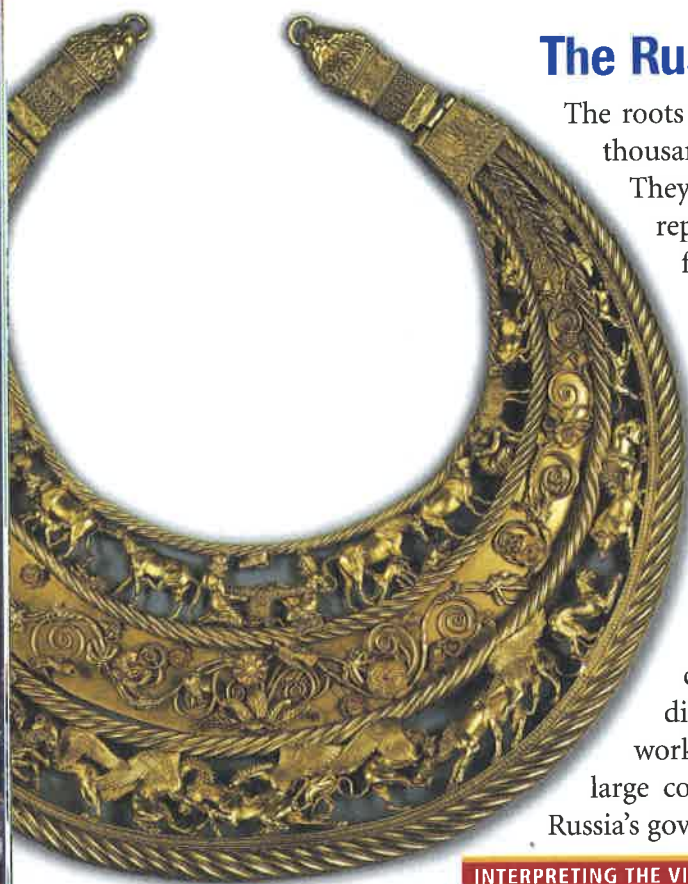
The Russian Empire

The roots of the Russian Empire lie in the grassy plains of the south. For thousands of years, people moved across the steppe, usually east to west. They came from what are now Mongolia, China, and the Central Asian republics. Bringing their herds with them, these peoples were fleeing droughts and wars. Each wave of newcomers brought new ways of life to the region. The main people to settle in what is now Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were the **Slavs**.

In the A.D. 800s the city of Kiev became an important center for trade between the Mediterranean and Baltic Sea. Among Kiev's early leaders were Scandinavian traders called **Rus** (ROOS). The name *Russia* comes from this word, which referred to Slavic peoples in the region.

Merchants also traveled into the forests farther north. At the same time these merchants founded new towns. Some of the towns that were located on high banks where rivers joined grew into cities. Moscow is an example. A prince ordered workers to dig ditches and build dirt walls on the site of an older settlement. The workers topped the dirt walls with a wooden wall. This fort became a large compound called the Kremlin. Its walls would eventually surround Russia's government buildings, churches, and palaces.

INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD This intricately detailed gold necklace was made by the Scythians, one of the early peoples who moved across the Eurasian steppe. They flourished from the 700s to the 300s B.C. The Scythians were known for their skill in warfare and on horseback. **Why do you think metalworking and jewelry making were valued art forms for a people such as the Scythians?**



Over time Christianity increasingly influenced the region. By the 1100s Eastern, or Orthodox, Christianity had become the main religion of Kiev. In 1240, Mongol invaders from Central Asia destroyed Kiev. They made the region the western outpost of their growing empire. For the common people, though, life went on much as it had before.

Conquest and Expansion While the Mongols remained in power, several states emerged. The strongest was Muscovy, north of Kiev. Its chief city was Moscow. In the late 1400s Ivan III, the prince of Moscow, won control over parts of Russia from the Mongols.

In 1547 Ivan IV, who became known as Ivan the Terrible, crowned himself **czar** (Zahr) of all Russia. The word *czar*, or *tsar*, comes from the Latin word *caesar* and means “emperor.” Under Ivan IV the Russian Empire stretched from north of Kiev to the Arctic Ocean and east to the Urals.

Gradually Russian fur trappers, hunters, and pioneers migrated eastward into Siberia. By 1637, explorers reached the Pacific coast at the Sea of Okhotsk (uh-KAWTSK). **Cossacks**, a hardy people from the southern steppe frontiers, played an important role in the eastward expansion.

Russia gained some European territory under Czar Peter the Great, who ruled from 1682 to 1725. He took over lands along the Baltic Sea. He also expanded Russian control in what are now Belarus and Ukraine. Peter had St. Petersburg built for his capital. (See Cities & Settlements: St. Petersburg.) Catherine the Great ruled Russia during the late 1700s. She took the northern side of the Black Sea and encouraged settlers to move to the Volga region. This expansion brought many non-Russian peoples within the Russian Empire.

In the 1800s Russians spread into the Caucasus and Central Asia. Much of the population there was Muslim. For a brief time, Russia controlled what is now Alaska. There was even a Russian fort and farming settlement in California. By 1860 Russia had taken much of the Amur (ah-MOOR) River region that had been claimed by China. After Russia lost a war with Japan (1904–05), the country retreated to its current borders with China and North Korea.

End of an Empire Russia started to industrialize by the late 1800s, but it remained largely a country of poor peasant farmers. These farmers, called **serfs**, worked for a lord. Serfs were bound to the land, which means they could not leave the lord’s land permanently without his permission. The serfs were freed in the 1860s, but rural poverty did not end. Soon life got worse for many Russians. Poor harvests led to food shortages. There was also an economic depression. By the start of World War I in 1914, the foundations of Russian society were on shaky ground. Russia suffered huge losses in the war, and social and economic problems worsened. Finally, the czar was forced to **abdicate**, or resign, in early 1917. A republic was set up but had little success. In the fall of 1917, a small group called the **Bolsheviks** overthrew the government, an event known as the Russian Revolution. The czar and his family were killed.

READING CHECK: *The Uses of Geography* What are some factors that led to the fall of the czar?



In Russian, Ivan IV was called Grozny, which means “Awe Inspiring.” He was indeed terrible at times, as he brutally suppressed the noble class—or boyars—and lashed out at enemies. Yet during Ivan’s reign, the empire expanded, and printing was introduced to Russia.

INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD

Vladimir Lenin gives a speech during the Communist Revolution. Lenin believed in what he called “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Proletariat means “working class.” How would Lenin’s plan for government contrast with what you have already learned about dictators or dictatorships?





These workers at a collective farm share a meal. Collective farms, or kolkhozy in Russian, were made up of many small holdings grouped into a single unit for joint operation under government supervision. Peasants were forced to join kolkhozy.



INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD

A child and her mother walk across Red Square in Moscow. What clues in the photograph may indicate that regional trade patterns have changed since the Soviet era?

The Soviet Union

The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, wanted to remake Russia using the ideas of German philosopher Karl Marx. Marx thought that the people of the working classes were victims of capitalism. Like Marx, Lenin thought the solution was communism. Under communism, the workers were to elect governing local bodies called **soviets** to pass laws and make decisions. The Russian Empire was renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union eventually included 15 republics, each based largely on ethnic territories.

Life in the Soviet Union The Soviet Union soon became a one-party, totalitarian state led at first by Lenin. After Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin took power. Stalin's brutal rule lasted until 1953. Both Lenin and Stalin tried to promote a single Soviet culture. They had names of cities and streets changed to honor communism's heroes. In addition, because it was the language of the political leadership, Russian spread to non-Russian ethnic groups.

Soviet economic planners set up a command economy. They also followed a policy of **autarky** (AW-tahr-kee). Under this system a country tries to produce all the goods that it needs. Trade with capitalist nations was very limited. Without competition, however, efficiency and product quality often fell. Production of consumer goods and services lagged far behind that of the United States and Western Europe.

The government ran large state farms, but agriculture faced constant problems. Food production was often low on the state farms. Millions of peasants died of starvation or in prison during the forced change to the new farming methods. Small private plots, which families worked in their spare time, produced about one fourth of the country's food.

Personal freedoms were strictly limited. People who disagreed with Communist leaders could be jailed. Under Stalin, millions were sent to terrible labor camps. Many of those camps were in the far north, both east and west of the Urals. This network of labor camps was called the **gulag**. Soviet leaders also tried to stop religious worship. They believed that religion would lessen people's loyalty to the state. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim houses of worship were closed or destroyed.

Yet the Soviet government did have some successes in education and health care. For example, by the 1980s some 90 percent of the people could read and write. Many people, including women, became doctors. In fact, basic health care was free and widely available. Most able workers had jobs.

A New Beginning Finally, the government allowed some economic and political changes in the 1980s. However, the Soviet Union began to fall apart in 1990 and collapsed at the end of 1991. Each of the 15 former Soviet republics became independent. The new countries kept the same boundaries as the old republics even when they divided ethnic groups.

Life changed quickly for the people of the former Soviet Union. Today citizens can finally choose among candidates in elections. News from around the

world now flows more freely. Religious freedoms have also expanded. In addition, communism is being replaced by capitalism. Shoppers can buy new consumer products. American fast food companies have opened restaurants there. In the new market economies, many businesses that had been owned by the government are in private hands. In many ways, however, the rapid change has caused severe hardships. You will read more about these problems in Section 3.

READING CHECK: Human Systems What are some ways that life has changed since the Soviet Union collapsed?

Culture

Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus share a strong sense of cultural identity. There are many similarities in language, religion, and customs. However, there is great cultural diversity within Russia. In fact, Russia has at least 60 different ethnic groups.

People and Languages Language is an important source of national identity in the region. At least 85 percent of Russians are Slavs and speak Slavic languages. The region's Slavic languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet, which was developed from an ancient Greek script. More than 95 percent of Ukrainians and about 98 percent of Belarusians are also Slavic. In fact, the great majority of Eurasia's more than 300 million Slavs live in these three countries.

As the Russian Empire grew, it pulled in many non-Slavic peoples. During the Soviet era, the lands where these non-Slavic peoples lived became special republics within the country. Russia has 21 of these republics today. Members of non-Slavic groups there speak different languages. Many books have been published in these languages. However, in most of the republics, Russian speakers are in the majority. In some of the republics, the non-Slavic languages are disappearing.



FOCUS ON HISTORY

The Peoples of the Caucasus Republics Some of Russia's ethnic republics are located in the Caucasus region in the south. Also in the Caucasus are the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Those three republics are independent countries today. The ethnic republics and countries in the Caucasus lie in a band of land that separates the Black and Caspian Seas. This area is made up of the high rugged Caucasus Mountains. The region's different ethnic groups developed within the hundreds of small isolated valleys in this mountain range.

The Caucasus is also what geographers call a **shatter belt**. It is a zone of frequent boundary changes and conflicts. Often shatter belts are located between major powers. Throughout history, peoples from the south—Turks, Persians, Arabs—and the north—Russians, Mongols, Tatars—have fought over the Caucasus. Ethnic tensions still trouble the region.



Among the peoples experiencing change are the Khanty of the Ob River basin. They are trying to protect their land from damage done by the oil industry.



Republics of the Russian Federation and Ethnic Composition

| Republic | Ethnic Composition |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| Adygea | Russian |
| Alania | Ossetian |
| Bashkortostan | Russian |
| Buryatia | Russian |
| Chechnya | Chechen |
| Chuvashia | Chuvash |
| Dagestan | Avar |
| Gorno-Altay | Russian |
| Ingushetia | Ingush |
| Kabardino-Balkaria | Kabard |
| Kalmykia | Kalmyk |
| Karachay-Cherkessia | Russian |
| Karelia | Russian |
| Khakassia | Russian |
| Komi | Russian |
| Mari El | Russian |
| Mordvinia | Russian |
| Sakha | Russian |
| Tatarstan | Tatar |
| Tyva | Tyva |
| Udmurtia | Russian |

Source: Centre for Russian Studies

INTERPRETING THE CHART

The chart lists the ethnic group that makes up the majority in each of the republics of the Russian Federation. Note that the Russian Federation is the country's formal name.